

## GUIDE 1:37 FACE TO FACE

The chapter begins the final eight chapter lexical sequence. The terms to be defined in these chapters are: “face,” “back,” “heart,” “spirit,” “soul,” “life/death,” “wing,” “eye,” and “hear.”

Our chapter is devoted to “*panim*” which means *face*, though the term is used in a number of extended and metaphorical ways. The immediate connection to the last chapter is that *panim*, when used of God, can mean rage or anger. We learned that divine “anger” always indicates the presence of heresy or of a disturbance in the conduct of the divine regime. We have that sense in Definition 2, below.

This chapter changes our focus. We had been talking about *intellectual maturity*. In the last four non-lexical chapters, we learned the danger of commencing the divine science, and the qualifications for the student of that science. We also learned of the limits of human intellect, which is why most people must absorb certain dogmas of the divine science in order to combat heresy. We now begin, gently, to enter the divine science itself. There is no sharp break in Maimonides’ thematic interests. Thus, though this chapter still employs the methods and some themes of the previous chapters, it is looking forward. The reader who has reached this point is qualified for the divine science, and there are references to those qualifications in the proof-texts for Definition 6, below.

Maimonides introduces here some of the major themes of divine science: Mosaic prophecy, the “separate intelligences,” divine providence, and time. The emphasis is on the concept of the *presence* of God, or of being in His presence, in definitions 3, 4 and 6 below. Maimonides is most concerned with the phrase, *panim el panim*, *face to face*, contrasting the impact of this *encounter* on Moses and on the Jews. (See, below, on several of these issues, our essays on *Intermediaries* and on the *Separate Intelligences*).

The basic idea of the chapter is that Moses has a direct *relation* with God, but only indirect *knowledge* of His essence. The problem of the chapter is that Maimonides does not believe the Jews at Sinai shared Moses’ relationship with God, and he must still shield the unqualified reader from that recognition.

Maimonides purpose for the chapter, however, is to register disagreement with Onkelos’ conception that the acquisition of pure intellect is impossible for man.

The first line presents a major ambiguity. Pines’ literal translation is: “Face is an equivocal (homonymous) term, its equivocality being mostly with respect to its figurative use,” *panim shem mshutaf, v’rov shitufo hu al derekh ha-hashala*. Kafih suggests this means that there are more homonymous uses in its figurative senses than in its first literal sense as the “face” of a person (*ad loc.*, note 2). Does that mean that the non-figurative use is never homonymous, or that there just are not so many cases of homonymous uses of the literal sense? The first proof-text, for example, presents a *literal* use of *panim*, “all *faces* are turned to paleness,” which occurs in a broadly *metaphorical* context about the messianic redemption. Similar opacity occurs in some of the definitions below, and even in Maimonides’ central focus on God’s relation with Moses. My suggestion is that this ambiguity is his strategy of esotericism in this chapter. It explains his unjustified use of twenty-two proof texts to make a small number of points. The purpose of these strategies is to protect those remaining unqualified students from realizing that the Jews at Sinai only had a mediated relation with God through Moses, despite their having heard “a certain sound” at the Mount (2:33).

This is a lexical chapter. See the explanation in Chapter 1:1, “Introduction to the Lexical Chapters of the Guide.”

## **PANIM (FACE): Homonym.**

1. The *face* of a living being.
2. *Anger*, especially when used with God, although God's "anger" is really our projection, see 1:54.
3. The *presence* and existence or "standing" of a person. When in the form of "*panim el panim*," or *face to face*, especially with Moses, it means that there is no *intermediary* between the person actually in God's presentless presence. It is like Abraham ben Maimonides concept of *encounter* (see my essay in chapter 1:18).
4. Adverb of *place*, in the sense of "present" or "before." It is difficult to distinguish this use from Definition 3, and the proof-text or texts are ambiguous. Maimonides uses Definition 4 to mean being in the presence of God, but *with* or *through* an intermediary. This is where he places his dispute with Onkelos.
5. Adverb of *time*, meaning "before" or "anciently." Maimonides uses this definition to discuss creation *ex nihilo*.
6. *Providential* concern and attention. Maimonides uses this definition to remind us of the qualifications for the student of divine science.

### Instances of Definition 1, Contextualized:

"And these [are] the words that the Lord spake concerning Israel and concerning Judah. For thus saith the Lord; We have heard a voice of trembling, of fear, and not of peace. Ask ye now, and see whether a man doth travail with child? Wherefore do I see every man with his hands on his loins, as a woman in travail, and all *faces (panim)* are turned into paleness?" (Jeremiah 30:4-6)

Maimonides understands this passage as "referring to the war of Gog and Magog, which comes sometime after the Messiah is revealed," (Letter to Yemen, Chapter 3). It is also an apt description of prophetic influx, which can seem like sexual invasion. Jeremiah imagines the birth of political change as a *man* giving birth, whose face turns white from the experience. While the entire context is metaphorical, face does mean face. Since it is the *corporeal* face of a person, Maimonides, as usual, presents negative examples in this and the next proof text. While the coming of the Messiah is desirable, the events associated with it are terrifying, "of trembling, of fear, and not of peace."

"And they dreamed a dream both of them, each man his dream in one night, each man according to the interpretation of his dream, the butler and the baker of the king of Egypt, which [were] bound in the prison. And Joseph came in unto them in the morning, and looked upon them, and, behold, they [were] sad. And he asked Pharaoh's officers that [were] with him in the ward of his lord's house, saying, Wherefore *look ye (pnekhem)* [so] sadly (*ra'im*) today?" (Genesis 40:5-7)

The two officers have prophetic dreams, which only Joseph can interpret. Only he has the imagination and the wisdom to discern and understand their symbols. These considerations lead us to Maimonides' fuller discussions of prophecy in Section Two of the Guide. The passage is negatively corporeal in its implication since Joseph comments on the sad faces of the butler and the baker: the dream foretells the death of one of them. It continues the last proof-text's suggestion of the actual pain (*ra'im*) felt by them during the invasion of prophecy.

### Instances of Definition 2, Anger, Contextualized:

"Then Eli answered [Hannah] and said, Go in peace: and the God of Israel grant [thee] thy petition that thou hast asked of him. And she said, Let thine handmaid find grace in thy sight. So the woman went her way, and did eat, and her *countenance (u'faneyah)* was no more [sad]." (1 Samuel 1:17-18—i.e.: "she was no longer angry")

In this instance of Definition 2, the anger is human. In the other four instances, the anger is divine. In all these passages, Maimonides understands “face” as anger, despite Bible translators’ different renderings. Hannah was “angry” because she was barren: her face is no longer “angry” when she receives the prophecy of her miracle birth of Samuel.

“The *anger (penei)* of the Lord hath divided them; he will no more regard them: they respected not the persons of the priests, they favoured not the elders.” (Lamentations 4:16)

The traditional understanding of the passage is that because the Jews did not respect their priests God divided them among the nations in exile. We project this *correction* back upon God as His “anger.” Perhaps that is what Maimonides means when he says that the homonymy of *panim* is mostly in its metaphorical sense. When it is a metaphor for God’s “anger,” it is not any divine “emotion” but only human emotion projected upward. Though *panim* is a metaphor for human anger, since it becomes a metaphor for *correction* when used with God, we can say that *panim* is homonymous in its metaphorical sense. The next three proof-texts embody this idea of projected anger.

“The *face (penei)* of the Lord [is] *against* them that do evil, to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth.” (Psalms 34:16)

Maimonides quoted line 18 of this Psalm in Guide 1:34: “The Lord [is] *nigh unto* them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit,” for his doctrine of *educational humility*, the capacity of the mature scholar to exercise patience before apparent contradictions in divine science. The two lines contrast who God is “against” and who He is “nigh unto.” This antithesis points to his doctrine in Guide 1:54, that “The pleasure and the displeasure of God, the approach to Him and the withdrawal from Him are proportional to the amount of man’s knowledge or ignorance concerning the Creator.” Evil men are willfully ignorant of God, and His “face” is against them; He is “nigh” to the humble who seek knowledge.

“Now therefore, I (Moses) pray thee, if I have found grace in thy sight, shew me now thy way, that I may know thee, that I may find grace in thy sight: and consider that this nation [is] thy people. And He said, My *presence (panai)* shall go [with thee], and I will give thee rest. And he said unto Him, If Thy *presence (panekha)* go not [with me], carry us not up hence.” (Exodus 33:13-15)

Kafih identifies a split in the commentators over whether *panai* here should mean “anger” or “presence/will.” Rashi and most authorities go with the latter. Maimonides, following Talmud, *Berachot* 7a, takes Exodus 33:14 to mean, “My *anger* shall depart and I will give thee rest.” He would therefore understand even line 15 to read, “If thy *anger* depart not, carry us not up hence.” He bases this unfamiliar reading on Exodus 32, the prior chapter, about the heresy of the Golden Calf, which fomented God’s “anger.”

“And if the people of the land do any ways hide their eyes from the man, when he giveth of his seed unto Molech, and kill him not. Then I will set my *face (panai)* against that man, and against his family, and will cut him off, and all that go a whoring after him, to commit whoredom with Molech, from among their people.” (Leviticus 20:4-5)

This quote directly links to the prior chapter in the Guide, about idolatrous heresy, in this case, it is some kind of child sacrifice to the Canaanite deity Molech. Maimonides does not believe this worship called for the actual slaughter of children, but *only* of having them walk through flames, see Mishneh Torah, *Avoda Zara*, 6:3. His real opposition to the practice is that it encourages *superstition*:

“They spread the belief that every child, that was not passed through the fire, must die. There is no doubt that on account of this absurd menace everyone at once obeyed, out of pity and sympathy for the child; especially as it was a trifling and a light thing that was demanded, in passing the child over the fire. We must further take into account that the care of young children is intrusted to women, who are generally weak-minded, and ready to believe everything, as is well known. The Law makes, therefore, an earnest stand against this practice, and uses in reference to it stronger terms than in any other kind of idolatry (quoting our proof-text). The true prophet then declares in the name of God that the very act, which is performed for the purpose of keeping the child alive, will bring death upon him who performs it, and

destruction upon his seed... Know that traces of this practice have survived even to the present day, because it was widespread in the world. You can see how midwives take a young child wrapped in its swaddling-clothes, and after having placed incense of a disagreeable smell on the fire, swing the child in the smoke over that fire. This is certainly a kind of passing children through the fire, and we must not do it. Reflect on the evil cunning of the author of this doctrine; how people continued to adhere to this doctrine, and how, in spite of the opposition of the Law during thousands of years, its name is not blotted out, and its traces are still in existence.” (Guide 3:37)

The punishment for Molech worship is a *correction* designed to eliminate superstition from the community. We feel the stern command to eliminate these customs as “rage,” but since we do not understand the purpose of the command, we project that “rage” on God.

Instances of Definition 3, Presence, Contextualized:

“And they dwelt from Havilah unto Shur, that [is] before Egypt, as thou goest toward Assyria: [and] he [Ishmael] died (*nafal*) in the presence (*pnei*) of all his brethren.” (Genesis 25:18)

This next group of quotes stand for “the presence and existence of a person,” *shem nokhakhhot ha-adam u'maamado* (“presence and standing”). The first three quotes are contextually negative. This first text is about the death of Ishmael, Abraham’s wayward son. Even the term used for his demise, *nafal*, “he fell,” the Midrash takes pejoratively (*Genesis Rabba* 62:5). Ishmael symbolizes the corporeal aspect of man, fallen farthest from the presence of God.

“And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the Lord, which he commanded them not. And there went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord. Then Moses said unto Aaron, This [is it] that the Lord spake, saying, I will be sanctified in them that come nigh me, and before (*pnei*) all the people I will be glorified. And Aaron held his peace.” (Leviticus 10:1-3).

In this verse, the “presence,” *p'nei*, is that of God, who is “present” to the people through His acts. According to Rashi, Aaron’s sons were drunk or “rendering halachic decisions before Moses,” or both. These were culpable acts according to the Midrash, despite their apparent innocuousness. Rashi, taking them as righteous men who erred, explains: “When the Holy One, blessed is He, exacts judgment upon the righteous, He becomes feared, exalted, and praised. Now, if this is so concerning the righteous, how much more is it so concerning the wicked!” This links to the idea in Guide 1:54 that one’s *relation* with God depends on one’s knowledge or ignorance of Him. (Midrash, *Leviticus Rabba* 12:1; Rashi from Talmud, *Zevachim* 115b; Abraham ben Maimonides agrees with Rashi, p. 115, *The Guide to Serving God*, Feldheim, 2008.)

“Then Satan answered the Lord, and said, Doth Job fear God for nought? Hast not thou made an hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he hath on every side? thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his substance is increased in the land. But put forth Thine hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse (lit. “bless”) Thee to Thy face (*panekha*).” (Job 1:9-11)

The line contains the most famous euphemism in the Bible. Satan himself cannot utter the words “curse Thee,” but must instead say, “bless Thee.” By contrast, were Job in the very *presence* of God, he would dare to curse Him for his punishment. The book of Job is part of the divine science; Maimonides remarks: “The strange and wonderful Book of Job treats of the same subject as we are discussing; its basis is a fiction, conceived for the purpose of explaining the different opinions which people hold on Divine Providence” (Guide 3:22).

“And the Lord spake unto Moses *face to face (panim el panim)*, as a man speaketh unto his friend.” (Exodus 33:11)

That is, Moses spoke to God in His *presence*, which means that there was no intermediary. See essay on *Intermediaries* below.

“Then Amaziah sent messengers to Jehoash, the son of Jehoahaz son of Jehu, king of Israel, saying, Come, let us look one another in the *face (lkha nitraei panim)*.” (2 Kings 14:8)

In between the two mentions of “face to face” at Sinai, why does Maimonides bring this earthy quotation? I would translate the three Hebrew words as “let’s have a face-off!” The story is from about the middle of the First Commonwealth. Amaziah, King of Judah, has just conquered the Edomites at Sela/Petra, in what is modern Jordan, returning it to the old Davidic Empire. Turning northward, he sees himself as the unifier of the two Jewish kingdoms. He lays down the challenge to Jehoash II of Israel to “have a face-off” by which he does not mean a *tête-à-tête*. Jehoash returns the challenge with a parable: there was a thistle and a cedar in Lebanon. The thistle told the cedar to “Give thy daughter to my son to wife: and there passed by a wild beast that [was] in Lebanon, and trode down the thistle.” Rashi explains the parable as a retelling of Genesis 34: the “thistle” was Shekhem, the “cedar” was Jacob and the “wild beast” Jacob’s sons who slaughtered the Shekhemites after their circumcision. Jehoash, the cedar, thereby rejected the hubris of Amaziah, the thistle. Amaziah spurned this diplomatic note. Jehoash responded by invading Judah, breaching the wall of Jerusalem, and taking Amaziah prisoner. “Face to face” is wonderful between Moses and God, but not between kings.

“The Lord talked with you *face to face (panim b’fanim)* in the mount out of the midst of the fire.” (Deuteronomy 5:4)

In this case, the people at Sinai are in God’s *presence* as Moses was, but because they lacked the proper qualifications they could not understand what they heard and required Moses to be their intermediary. See *Intermediaries*, below.

Instance of Definition 3 or 4 Contextualized:

“And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my *face (u’fanai)* shall not be seen.” (Exodus 33:21-23)

This passage acts as a bridge between Definitions 3 and 4, and he gives it as an example of both. In this first case, Moses’ *presence* before God, though unmediated, does not allow him to grasp the divine essence. Maimonides repeats this text for Definition 4, presence *with* intermediaries, but only as an opportunity to criticize Onkelos, who takes it in that sense. See *Intermediaries*, below

Instance of Definition 4, Mediated Presence, Contextualized:

“And Cush begat Nimrod: he began to be a mighty one in the earth. He was a mighty hunter before the Lord: wherefore it is said, Even as Nimrod the mighty hunter *before the Lord (lifnei hashem)*.” (Genesis 10:8-9)

*Lifnei hashem* is the only quote-shard that Maimonides gives as an unqualified example of Definition 4. He writes, “It is often used in this sense (Definition 4) with regard to God,” (Pines translation). The problem is that *lifnei hashem* is a phrase occurring in different contexts well over a hundred times in the Bible. Munk (1803–1867, French translator of the Guide), Ibn Tibbon and Pines all related the phrase to its use in Abraham’s prophetic dream (Genesis 18:22). Kafih complains that their choice is arbitrary (Note 23, *ad loc.*). Far more satisfying is Schwarz’ first choice, the one I quote above about the mighty hunter Nimrod. That is a better choice for methodological reasons since it is the first use in the Torah. It is also very good because of Nimrod’s character. Rashi assembles these traditional source comments about Nimrod:

“He began to be a mighty man to cause the entire world to rebel against the Holy One, blessed be He, with the plan of the Generation of the Dispersion (i.e., the Tower of Babel. Talmud, *Eruvin* 53a, *Chullin* 89a). He ensnared people’s minds with his speech and misled them to rebel against the Omnipresent (Midrash, *Genesis Rabbah* 37:2). He intended to provoke Him (God) to His face (from Sifra Bekhukotai 2:2). Therefore it is said about any man who is brazenly wicked, who recognizes his Master and intends to rebel (*li’mrod*) against Him, it is said, This one is like Nimrod, a mighty hunter.”

This last remark is a pun comparing his name, Nimrod, to the act of rebellion. He created the first great empire after the flood and commissioned the building of the Tower of Babel to challenge the rule of God. Nimrod is a figure who has the capacity to act as a channel from God to man, but who uses that knowledge to make himself a

god over men. He poses as mediator.

It is at this juncture that Maimonides repeats, now for Definition 4, the prior proof-text, “And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my *face* (*u’fanai*) shall not be seen.” He repeats the passage only in order to dispute what he takes to be Onkelos’ view of this passage, that it introduces an ineffable mediating presence, the “souls of the spheres.” See *Intermediaries*, below.

Instances of Definition 5, *The Nature of Time*, Contextualized:

“Now this [was the manner] *in former time* (*l’fanim*) in Israel concerning redeeming and concerning changing, for to confirm all things; a man plucked off his shoe, and gave [it] to his neighbour: and this [was] a testimony in Israel. (Ruth 4:7)

Definition 5 is about time, and specifically about cosmic time. Maimonides does not believe that time has any ultimate reality, but is merely the *number* of motion which is an accident of matter. Aristotle asserted that the universe existed before everything, *qadim*, in Arabic, that is, it existed always. Maimonides argues instead that God created the universe *ex nihilo*. He did not cite this passage because he was interested in the legal customs of the time of Ruth and Boaz, but because it mentions the word “shoe” in connection with the phrase, “in former time.” The shoe goes on the foot, and, of course, foot means *cause* (Guide 1:28). Before the beginning of time, God caused everything.

“I said, O my God, take me not away in the midst of my days: thy years [are] throughout all generations. *Of old* (*l’fanim*) hast thou laid the foundation of the earth: and the heavens [are] the work of thy hands. They shall perish, but thou shalt endure: yea, all of them shall wax old like a garment; as a vesture shalt thou change them, and they shall be changed.” (Psalms 102:24-26)

This proof-text is also about creation *ex nihilo*. God creates time by creating the “foundations of the earth,” that is, its elemental matter whose motion is numbered as time. Time is a major issue of the Guide and of the divine science. He says in 1:52, “There is no relation between God and time or space.” In 1:73, he criticizes the Mutakallimun notion of “time-atoms” and their understanding of time generally. In 2:13, he says: “Even time itself is among the things created.” In 2:30, he rejects the theory of some of the rabbinic sages that time existed before creation: “The foundation of our faith is the belief that God created the Universe from nothing; that time did not exist previously, but was created; for it depends on the motion of the sphere, and the sphere has been created.”

Instances of Definition 6, *God’s Special Providence for the Intellectually Mature*, Contextualized:

“Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment: thou shalt not respect the *person* (*f’nei*) of the poor, nor honour the person of the mighty: [but] in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbour.” (Leviticus 19:15)

“For, behold, the Lord, the Lord of hosts, doth take away from Jerusalem and from Judah the stay and the staff, the whole stay of bread, and the whole stay of water, The mighty man, and the man of war, the judge, and the prophet, and the prudent, and the ancient, The captain of fifty, and the *honourable man* (*u’nsu fanim*), and the counsellor, and the cunning artificer, and the eloquent orator.” (Isaiah 3:1-3)

For the Lord your God [is] God of gods, and Lord of lords, a great God, a mighty, and a terrible, which regardeth not *persons* (*fanim*), nor taketh reward.” (Deuteronomy 10:17)

“Speak unto Aaron and unto his sons, saying, On this wise ye shall bless the children of Israel, saying unto them: The Lord bless thee, and keep thee: The Lord make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: The Lord lift up his *countenance* (*panav*) upon thee, and give thee peace.” (Numbers 6:23-26)

Maimonides explains Definition 6 in vague terms. “*Panim* is also a term for ‘concern’ and ‘providential supervision,’” *ha-daaga v’ha-hashgakha* (my trans., based on Schwarz, *ad loc.* note 14 p. 91). These four proof-texts come to remind us of the qualifications of the entrant into divine science. We treated these before in 1:34. Judiciousness is one of the chief qualities, emphasized in the first quote. The second text contains the list of

necessary qualities for the student of *Maaseh Bereshit* and *Maaseh Merkava* (Talmud, *Hagigah* 13a). These quotes remind us again, as a warning over the gate, that it is dangerous for the unqualified to enter there. The third proof-text underscores the point: just as God acts as a fair and unbribable judge, so the qualified student of divine science must conduct himself like God, that is, with judiciousness. The final proof-text yields the promise that the qualified student may yet succeed to prophecy. The prophet can lead the Jews to the level where God's Presence will again be in their midst as on Sinai. Maimonides says here that the verse: "refers to His making providence accompany us," *c'lomar, l'grom l'hashgakha sh'taloveh otanu* (Pines' English trans, Schwarz' Hebrew).

## INTERMEDIARIES

"And it came to pass, as Moses entered into the tabernacle, the cloudy pillar descended, and stood [at] the door of the tabernacle, and [the Lord] talked with Moses. And all the people saw the cloudy pillar stand [at] the tabernacle door: and all the people rose up and worshipped, every man [in] his tent door. And the Lord spake unto Moses *face to face (panim el panim)*, as a man speaketh unto his friend. And he turned again into the camp: but his servant Joshua, the son of Nun, a young man, departed not out of the tabernacle." (Exodus 33:9-11)

Maimonides interprets this verse:

"I.e., both (Moses and God) being present, without any intervening medium between them. This corresponds to 'There he heard the voice of One speaking unto him (from off the mercy seat that [was] upon the ark of testimony, from between the two cherubims: and He spake unto him)' (Numbers 7:89). Thus it will be clear to you that the perception of the Divine voice without the intervention of an angel is expressed by 'face to face.'"

This is one of the strongest statements Maimonides makes that there can be a direct relation between God and man. It supports the position that his *negative theology* is moderate rather than absolute. In 2:45, he says, "All prophets are prophetically addressed by an angel, except Moses our teacher, in reference to whom scripture says 'mouth to mouth I speak to him' (Numbers 12:8)." In *Mishneh Torah, Yodei Ha-Torah* 1:10 he explains that Moses received so much direct knowledge of God that, in his mind, he could distinguish Him from all other beings just as a person can distinguish a friend whose back is seen. *Yodei* 7:6 emphasizes that no intermediary came between God and Moses, unlike with all other prophets. There was no angel, spirit or any creation of Moses' imagination. (See Abraham ben Maimonides, *Guide to Serving God*, 583-585, for what may be a contrary view).

My assessment is that Moses did indeed have a direct *relationship* with God, but the *knowledge* he gained of God could not be of God's essence. It could not be of God's essence because that essence, Maimonides holds, is identical with God, and man cannot possess God without being God.

Maimonides quotes a second proof text in which Moses recalls the time God also spoke face to face with the whole people at Sinai:

"And Moses called all Israel, and said unto them, Hear, O Israel, the statutes and judgments which I speak in your ears this day, that ye may learn them, and keep, and do them. The Lord our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. The Lord made not this covenant with our fathers, but with us, [even] us, who [are] all of us here alive this day. The Lord talked with you *face to face (panim b'fanim)* in the mount out of the midst of the fire. I stood between the Lord and you at that time, to shew you the word of the Lord: for ye were afraid by reason of the fire, and went not up into the mount..." (Deuteronomy 5:1-5)

Maimonides mentions this verse twice in the Guide. In 1:13, we learned that Moses “stood” between God and the people means God *caused* him to be the prophetic channel for the revelation of Torah. Rashi extends this idea by saying that the “you” mentioned in the verse is not “with our fathers” but with the Jewish people, down to today. He quotes the following material from Midrash *Pesikta Rabbathi*: “Rabbi Berechiah said, ‘So said Moses: ‘Do not say that I am misleading you about something that does not exist, as an agent does, acting between the seller and the buyer, [because] behold, the Seller Himself is speaking with you.’” Moses “stood” as the channel but we who study that Torah are its direct recipients, without an intermediary.

In 2:33, Maimonides quotes the verse again. He reconsiders what “the Lord talked with *you* face to face” means. Maimonides questions the people’s qualification to receive prophecy, and concludes that they heard *something* directly, but not with Moses’ clarity. “The people did not understand the voice in the same degree as Moses did.” They were, however, able to make out the first two commandments, the existence and unity of God: “The Israelites heard the first and the second commandments from God, i.e., they learnt the truth of the principles contained in these two commandments in the same manner as Moses, and not through Moses.” Nonetheless, Maimonides holds that these two commandments are rationally derivable by anyone.

In other words, the prophetic quality achieved by the people at Sinai did not extend to comprehending most of the sounds they heard. This conclusion forces itself just because of Maimonides’ concept of the intellectual maturity necessarily required to enter divine science, which the multitude lack. “As to the revelation on Mount Sinai, all saw the great fire, and heard the fearful thunderings, that caused such an extraordinary terror; but only those of them who were duly qualified were prophetically inspired, each one according to his capacities” (Guide 2:32). This point is controversial, as we will see, and must be kept from most readers who cannot yet grasp its rationale. He says this is “one of the secrets of the Law” (2:33).

## DISPUTE WITH ONKELOS

Some things are even beyond the grasp of Moses, even though he is face to face in the unmediated presence of God:

“And the Lord said, Behold, [there is] a place by me, and thou shalt stand upon a rock: And it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a clift of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by: And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face (u’fanai) shall not be seen.” (Exodus 33:21-23)

Maimonides writes that the passage means “My true existence (i.e., essence, *amitat mtziut*: he uses *amitat* for essence), as it is, cannot be comprehended.” God denies Moses knowledge of his essence. We must understand God is *directly telling* Moses that he cannot access the divine essence. Unmediated presence of God does not imply essential knowledge of God.

This passage acts as a bridge between Definitions 3 and 4, and he gives it as an example of both, quoting it twice, first for *unmediated* presence and secondly for *mediated* presence. Definition 4 stands for *mediated* presence.

Maimonides does not clearly articulate Definition 4. He says (in Pines’ translation) that it means “an adverb of place that is rendered in Arabic by the words: *amāma* and *bāna yadāka*.” These two Arabic terms Pines translates “in front of thee” and “in thy presence,” respectively. But Efron thinks that Maimonides’ uses these contrasting Arabic terms to clarify an ambiguity in the term *l’fnei*, “before,” in *l’fnei hashem*. As in Hebrew, so in English, *before/l’fnei* can mean *before in time* or in *place*. Efron explains, “It is used here...because *l’fnei* does not clearly indicate place, as it also signifies temporal priority” (*Dictionary*, p. 14), and Maimonides wants to emphasize that in this case it means place.

He then quotes Onkelos, whose Aramaic translation renders it, “And those *before* me shall not be seen”:

“‘But my *face* (*u’fanai*) shall not be seen,’ according to Onkelos, who renders it, ‘And those *before* me shall not be seen,’ *v’dikadmai lo yitkhazun*. He (Onkelos) finds here an allusion to the fact, that there are also higher created beings of such superiority that their true nature cannot be perceived by man: viz., the ideals, separate intellects, which in their relation to God are described as being constantly before Him (*amāma*), or between His hands (*bān yadāka*), i.e., as enjoying uninterruptedly the closest attention of Divine Providence. He, i.e., Onkelos, considers that the things which are described as completely perceptible are those beings which, as regards existence, are inferior to the ideals, viz., substance (*khomer—matter*) and form: in reference to which we are told, ‘And thou shalt see that which is *behind* me’ (*ibid.*), i.e., beings, from which, as it were, *I turn away*, and which *I leave behind* me. This figure is to represent the utter remoteness of such beings from the Deity.”

Maimonides interprets that “those before” God are the “separate intellects” *siklim nivdalim*. These are the souls/intellects of the planetary spheres in the Aristotelean cosmology, see essay below. Maimonides seems to grant tepid approval to Onkelos, since he also embraces this cosmology, but, the fact is, he disagrees with him. He has his own interpretation of the passage, which is that Moses will know God’s actions, not His divine essence.

Maimonides’ objection to Onkelos is that by making *face* mean *those before Me*, he has removed the immediacy implied by the *presence* of God. Moreover, he objects to the notion that the separate intellects, *those before Me*, are inaccessible to our intellect, and that our intellects only grasp material objects. This has been the whole point of Maimonidean philosophy, that we can and must transcend our materiality to grasp the active intellect, and that there is a *unity of intellect* among these entities at the level of active intellect.

Onkelos seems to Maimonides to emphasize the point when he says that “and thou shalt see my *back*” should translate to “And thou shalt see that which is *behind* me” *v’tekhezei yat d’vatrai*. Maimonides explains “that which is behind me” means that man can only apprehend material objects, a doctrine which is obnoxious to him. In the next chapter, the lexical chapter on *back*, *akhor*, he returns to the passage explaining: “‘And thou shalt see my back (*akhorai*)’; thou shalt perceive that which follows Me, is similar to Me (*v’nitdama li*), and is the result of my will, i.e., all things created by Me.” The things which are similar to God, which are beings created by Him, are human intellects, not material objects. That similarity to Him insures that man can transcend his material state and apprehend purely intellectual objects, including the separate intelligences.

## THE SEPARATE INTELLIGENCES

This chapter begins a discussion of the separate intelligences, sometimes called the “souls of the spheres.” In Guide 3:7 Maimonides explains their relation with both God and man:

“God controls the spheres and what they contain: therefore the individual beings in the spheres remain permanently in the same form....where each... individual being has a permanent existence, Providence gives permanency and constancy. From the existence of the spheres other beings derive existence, which are constant in their species but not in their individuals.”

Michael Schwarz takes the opportunity of this chapter’s mention of the “separate intelligences,” *siklim nivdalim*, to assemble the doctrine of these intelligences in a note to his Hebrew translation (note 10, *ad loc.*, on pages 89-90). He reviews the doctrine in Maimonides and as it emerged in the work of the great Muslim philosophers Alfarabi (870-950) and Avicenna (980-1037). I briefly summarize his note, worth studying in the original.

The doctrine emerges from some remarks of Aristotle as developed by the Neo-Platonic emanationist tradition. Muslim philosophy absorbed this tradition. The intelligences are called “separate” because they are non-corporeal. God, as “the first cause,” emanates the first separate intelligence. That intelligence emanates a second,

the second emanates a third, on down to the tenth intelligence. Each intelligence emanates “within it” a sphere in the cosmological heavens, which sphere bears its stars and planets. The first intelligence is the cause establishing the upper heavens and all they govern. The second governs the fixed stars; the third governs the sphere bearing Saturn; the fourth Jupiter; the fifth Mars; the sixth governs the Sun; the seventh Venus; the eighth Mercury; the ninth governs the Moon. The tenth intelligence is the *active intellect*, which does not emanate a sphere.

Schwarz divides the work of the active intellect in four parts:

1. The active intellect causes the potential intellect that is natural to man to become an actual intellect, that is, it conducts the human intellect to true knowledge.
2. The active intellect gives form to the corporeal things in our universe, that is, it makes them *actual*. By in-forming matter, it causes the existence of material things.
3. It causes the divine emanation to enter the mind of the philosopher, and the mind *and* imagination of the prophet. In this category, Schwarz includes the inspiration that actualizes the infant’s potential to speak, *koakh m’daber*. The infant’s potential only becomes actual when the active intellect helps the infant speak.
4. The active intellect channels the providential action that maintains all things below the moon.

Aristotle recognized the existence of intelligences separate from matter, including the active intellect mentioned in *De Anima* 3:5. But the system of ten intelligences is a Neo-Platonic development in later Muslim philosophy. Note its similarity to the system of the *sefirot* in Jewish esoteric thought. (See, Wolfson, Harry A., “The Plurality of Immovable Movers in Aristotle and Averroës,” *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion*, 1973, v. 1, p.1).

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